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ABSTRACT

The connections between art therapy and the teaching of writing are many. The process of art therapy is essentially art making followed by talk--a process that parallels the process of writing and reflecting about writing that is encouraged in writing classrooms. It is a process aimed at self discovery and consciousness, whether in a writing classroom or in art therapy. Students, writing about their writing, indicate that they are opened to feeling and often surprised by insight. Occasionally they report being changed by their writing. Individuals must differentiate their own voices from the great cultural voice, and they need encouragement and practice to do that. Providing the means for telling and reflecting on these stories is what a writing teacher can do, even within the context of an institution of higher learning and of a discipline. (SR)

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# Art Therapy: What Does It Have to Say to Writing Teachers?

I would like to preface my thoughts on connections between art therapy and the teaching of writing with a quotation from therapist and theorist, Alice Miller, in which she describes the personal results of doing art.

> It was not until I started to experiment with spontaneous painting in 1973 that I first was able to gain access to the undistorted reality of my childhood. In the pictures I painted I was confronted with the terror that my mother, a brilliant pedagogue, had inflicted on me in my upbringing. . . . The spontaneous painting I began to do helped me not only to discover my personal story, but also to free myself from the intellectual constraints and concepts of my upbringing and my professional training, which I now recognized to be false, deceptive, and disastrous in its impact. The more I learned to follow my impulses in a playful way with colors and forms, the weaker became my allegiance to conventions of an aesthetic or any other nature. I did not want to paint beautiful pictures; it was not even my goal to paint good pictures. All I wanted was to help the truth to break through. (xii,xiii)

I include her story to suggest the power unleashed when we uncover knowledge of ourselves and our unique stories and also to illustrate how the conscious and reasoning mind can limit our understanding--how access to the non-verbal or visual, to the "material" hidden deep within us, can be a source of understanding, can be motivating and powerful. Of course, it can also be a source of pain, as Miller suggests. It cannot be easy to come to terms with the truth of abuse: what that means about the parent, or about one's idea of love, or even what that means about one's self. Yet, in acknowledging some new truth about her childhood, Alice Miller was led to revise all of her previous psychoanalytic training and thereby changed the course of her work.

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Miller's story reflects an especially dramatic result of art making--an activity obviously crucial to any art therapy. Art making has its own "internal rhythm," writes art therapist Judith Rubin--a rhythmn that involves a person in the effort of attempting to master a particular medium, and that also brings about "fusion" with the art work that he or she produces. Artists speak of their materials as providing a kind of consistency, what Joan Eriksen calls a "lawfulness." Art therapy builds on this inherent engagement of artist and materials in the making of art in the belief that it enables "creative expression of the unconscious" and "makes overt what would otherwise be covert" (Feder 26). The role of the therapist is partly to enable that artistic process out of which the covert emerges and partly to respond to the art, thus, potentially at least, helping to organize it and bring it to consciousness for the artist. Such response takes place within a dialogue between artist and therapist, one that mirrors the dialogue between separate or warring parts of the self--a dialogue that Carl Jung believed was "conducted largely through the media of dreams and symbols" (Feder 28).

Art therapy, then, is a discipline built around at least two ways of knowing--that of artist and that of therapist--wherein each component and role is valued. Apparently most art therapists find value in the art making itself--find that working with the paint, chalk, or clay is in itself healing or cathartic and integrative even without the intervention of the therapist or the understanding attained in talking about the art or the experience of art making. But most therapists also indicate that the art, in and of itself, is incomplete and that it is in the **linkage of visual to verbal that consciousness or insight is won**. "Art therapy combines a powerful, deeply involving experience with a distancing, organizing perspective. Through both vision and words [comes] a true in-sight or 'seeing in'" (Rubin 139). Like our dreams, our personal imagery is a bearer of meaning for us. It is the language of our pre-literate, nonverbal, or unconscious self. Some would say of our soul. But without words, it remains unknown to us, not fully claimed, its meaning trapped in the image. And words and meanings without imagery and symbols, particular stories and concrete experiences behind them, are just as incomplete. In other words, without access to the symbology at our very center, imbedded in our histories, we are as likely to be trapped in words, stuck in our verbal constructs.

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My grandmother and great grandfather were both artists, though as you might imagine, very different kinds of artists. My grandmother painted small still lifes; my grandfather

painted landscapes and wall murals. As often happens in families, my sister inherited the artist identity and I was left to participate in other spheres. So I did not begin to "do art" until my own children were born. As toddlers, they joined me in art making, or what we called "projects." One-third of my bedroom was taken up by a huge table on which we folded origami May baskets, tore and pasted tissue collages, splashed paint onto our air dried clay bowls. I cannot say that I discovered any buried images, but I did discover play, in which I took time out from other roles and experienced a true sharing--especially with my daughter.

Art therapist Arthur Robbins writes, "Art becomes a bridge for deeper communication . . . art and creativity can be useful in several ways: they may help initiate contact, establish rapport, serve as a means to externalize and concretize inner images and affects from the past, clarify transference/counter-transference manifestations, and provide a safe frame within which to organize patients' communications"(150). In other words, art can serve many functions for the artist, and hence for a relationship in which two or more participate together as artists, besides giving form to one's inner world. So, too, with writing, as we know.

My students acknowledge, in writing about their writing, that it has allowed them to express feelings, to understand themselves better, to see themselves and their experiences differently. In short, they are opened to feeling and often surprised by insight; occasionally they report being changed by their writing. For example, My student "Shelly" wrote the following: "In my writing I found many different things. I determined that I feel stronger about some issues than others. The issues that I thought I really had no opinion on turn out to be issues that I am concerned with but never put any emphasis on. I also found through my writings that feelings about things came flowing through. When I thought I felt confusion many times it was anger." Student "Tom" wrote, "I've learned that 'learning' not only comes from a teacher or professor but also from the other members in the class and most importantly from myself. This makes me realize that I have come to the point in my life where I am not a little kid who needs to be told what to do, but rather a young adult with opinions, questions, and answers of my own." Finally, student "Zach" wrote, "My writing gives me an escape. It helps me sort out how I'm thinking and scream at the top of my lungs. It makes things not seem so crowded, like I can separate the facts or circumstances and then look at them."

This writing about writing involves stepping away from the product and its making--turning that and the writing self into the subject. Such "metalanguage" is precisely what I and other teachers also encourage as the necessary second step of the doing/discussing process--so similar to the process of engagement in art making followed by reflection that art therapists describe. Pat Belanoff has noted that "good" writers just naturally engage in such metatalk. Further, my reading of therapy practice suggests that people need to do it--that it is an activity of consciousness. Moreover, that it allows for what therapists may call internalization, but what I prefer to call "generalizability." Generalizability, I think, is the ability to adapt to a variety of contexts, something that is only possible when a person has a deep knowledge, a felt sense of the process, of how to go about something, as well as the words to describe it. And I think that process, which is known from the inside, must be very broad so as to encompass a range of detail.

My reading of therapy practice tells me therapists participate doggedly in a process--one that they hope their clients internalize over time, so as to be used in new contexts, with whatever the details. One that also includes metatalk as an activity crucial to consciousness. The process of art therapy is essentially art making followed by talk (doing/discussing)--a process that parallels the process of writing and reflecting about writing that I encourage in my writing classrooms. As I see it, this process aims directly at self discovery and consciousness, whether in a writing classroom or in art therapy. I want to stress, too, that consciousness entails awareness of ourselves as participants in a culture and within systems of power and domination. That it entails social responsibility.

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Given this and other parallels between therapy and what I would call liberatory classrooms, I ask myself, **what then do I do that is different from what a therapist does?** After all, as I said, I too encourage consciousness; I too ask about thoughts and feelings surrounding a product and the process, and engage them in a process of action and reflection. Like a therapist I encourage honesty and authenticity, ask students to write about what matters, encourage idiosyncratic perspective and language, allow talk of and reflection on feeling. Because writing like art concretizes self--gives form to chaos, or creates a "container," if you will, for emotion (one that is relatively safe), engages a reflective as well as an experiencing self, allows symbolic expression (not necessarily conscious on the writer's part) and even fantasy. Because it allows a sense of oneness or fusion and a stepping away or separating from that, writers also work with a tension that is

fundamental to human being--the tension between merging and separating. Finally, because, despite my best efforts, my role as a teacher sets up a transference relationship in that, like a therapist or parent, I'm "supposed to know." So many parallels maintain between therapy and writing, the distinctions are hard to see.

**If, indeed, so many parallels exist, where is the distinction?** I think the question is still a good one. I still hear colleagues proclaim, "I am not a therapist after all." Usually such proclamations accompany a story about a student whose most recent paper covers her attempted suicide or a student who wept in class when she tried to talk about a journal describing her experience of rape. At such times, of course, we are only too aware of both our desire and our inability to solve the problems of our students, to make it "all better." Nor are we sure what to say. But even if we knew what t o **do**, the last thing most writing teachers would want to **be** is a therapist (unless it's a humanist); we love to deal in words and texts and we enjoy this activity called"teaching!"

I think writing teachers within the university have been anxious about the parallel and, when pushed up against the wall, have "protested too much." Perhaps now, in 1993, our protest is partly due to its humanist orientation; certainly art therapy is part of a tradition which emphasizes growth or self actualization rather than treatment. When teachers emphasize growth, empowerment, self development, rather than skills acquisition or comprehension or even audience and discourse communities, the distinctions begin to blur, but is this a good reason not to value individual growth?

What I can only think of as anxiety on the part of many of us is largely due to this proximity between therapy and liberatory writing classrooms that I have noted. Unfortunately this discomfort has prevented us from even looking at what therapy does, how it works, what it knows. Unfortunately in our haste to identify ourselves as teachers (allied with thinkers) rather than as therapists (allied with feelers), we have also refused in some way to consider the student as a whole person, even though in our classrooms we require students to be writers--that is, to be whole persons (thinkers, feelers, independent individuals with pasts, values, lives and opinion). Think how confusing this must be for our students.

Yet I think many of us <u>have</u> accepted that the writing students do in our classrooms can deeply affect them and possibly change their lives, and that this is what education is even about. Others, believing in the author's death, have prioritized the cultural scene of the

writing. I, too, worry about the historic tie between humanism and conceptions of individuality grounded in phallocentrism. Yet, more than ever before, **individuals must differentiate their own voices from the great cultural voice**, must express their own images apart from the image culture that prevails, and I believe they need encouragement and practice to do that. Put another way, even post modernists must occasionally experience difficult marriages, disturbed children, or the memory of lonely victimized childhoods. They have relationships, hopes, work weeks, bodies, progenitors, and genders. They have lives and stories. Providing the means for telling and reflecting on these is what I can do, as a teacher, and even within the context of an institution of higher learning and of our own discipline.

Here is one distinction between therapy and writing: I meet students primarily in the socially defined space of a classroom, each in our predetermined roles of teacher and student--not as client and therapist. What students do with the experience, whether they even call it learning, is for them to decide, since we are autonomous, albeit linked, both under contract for specific acts. Much else is left undefined, however--subject to my agenda and the community in which that agenda develops. In fact, as I define that community, it extends beyond my institution and discipline, to include what has sometimes been called the "helping professions," in service to the future of the human family--a family that I can only hope will value individual consciousness built on knowledge of ourselves and our unique histories.

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